



THE PRODIGAL JUDGE

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"It's positively squalid!" cried Betty, with a little stamp of her foot. Ware glanced about with dull eyes. "I'll tell you, Betty, I'm busy this morning; you poke about and see what you want done and we'll do it," he said, and made a hasty retreat to his office.

Betty returned to the porch and seating herself on the top step, with her elbows on her knees and her chin sunk in the palms of her hands, gazed about her miserably enough. She was still there when half an hour later Charley Norton galloped up the drive from the highroad. Catching sight of her on the porch, he sprang from the saddle, and, throwing his reins to a black boy, hurried to her side.

"Inspecting your domain, Betty?" he asked, as he took his place near her on the step.

"Why didn't you tell me, Charley—or at least prepare me for this?" she asked, almost tearfully.

"How was I to know, Betty? I haven't been here since you went away, dear—what was there to bring me? Old Tom would make a cow pasture out of the Garden of Eden, wouldn't he—a beautiful, practical, sordid soul he is!"

Norton spent the day at Belle Plain; and though he was there on his good behavior as the result of an agreement they had reached on board The Nalad, he proposed twice.

Tom was mistaken in his supposition that Betty would soon tire of Belle Plain. She demanded men, and teams, and began on the lawns. This interested and fascinated her. She was out at sun-up to direct her laborers. She had the advantage of Charley Norton's presence and advice for the greater part of each day in the week, and Sundays he came to look over what had been accomplished, and, as Tom firmly believed, to put that little fool up to fresh nonsense. He could have bootied him!

As the grounds took shape before her delighted eyes, Betty found leisure to institute a thorough reformation indoors. A number of house servants were rescued from the quarters and she began to instruct them in their new duties.

Betty's sphere of influence extended itself. She soon began to have her doubts concerning the treatment accorded the slaves, and was not long in discovering that Hicks, the overseer, ran things with a heavy hand. Matters reached a crisis one day when, happening to ride through the quarters, she found him disciplining a refractory black. She turned sick at the sight. Here was a slave actually being whipped by another slave while Hicks stood looking on with his hands in his pockets, and with a brutal, satisfied air.

"Stop!" commanded Betty, her eyes blazing. She strove to keep her voice steady. "You shall not remain at Belle Plain another hour."

Hicks said nothing. He knew it would take more than her saying so to get him off the place. Betty turned her horse and galloped back to the house. She felt that she was in no condition to see Tom just at that moment, and dismounting at the door, ran upstairs to her room.

Meantime the overseer sought out Ware in his office. His manner of stating his grievance was singular. He began by swearing at his employer. He had been insulted before all the quarter—his rage fairly choked him; he could not speak.

Tom seized the opportunity to swear back.

"Sent you off the place, did she; well, you'll have to eat crow. I'll do all I can. I don't know what girls were ever made for anyhow, damned if I do!" he added.

Hicks consented to eat crow only after Mr. Ware had cursed and cajoled him into a better and more forgiving frame of mind.

Later, after Hicks had made his apology, the two men smoked a friendly pipe and discussed the situation. Tom pointed out that opposition was useless, a losing game; you could get your way by less direct means. She wouldn't stay long at Belle Plain, but while she did remain they must avoid any more crises of the sort through which they had just passed, and presently she'd be sick of the place.

In the midst of her activities Betty occasionally found time to think of Bruce Carrington. She was sure she did not wish to see him again! But when three weeks had passed she began to feel incensed that he had not appeared. She thought of him with hot cheeks and a quickening of the heart. It was anger.

Then one day when she had decided forever to banish all memory of him from her mind, he presented himself at Belle Plain.

She was in her room just putting the finishing touches to an especially satisfying toilet when her maid tapped on the door and told her there was a



She instantly recognized the broad shoulders.

gentleman in the parlor who wished to see her.

"Is it Mr. Norton?" asked Betty. "No, Miss—he didn't give no name, Miss."

When Betty entered the parlor a moment later she saw her caller standing with his back turned toward her as he gazed from one of the windows, but she instantly recognized those broad shoulders, and the fine poise of the shapely head that surmounted them.

"Oh, Mr. Carrington!" and Betty stopped short, while her face grew rather pale and then crimsoned. Then she advanced boldly and held out a frigid hand. "I didn't know—so you are alive—you disappeared so suddenly that night!"

"Yes, I'm alive," he said, and then with a smile, "but I fear before you get through with me we'll both wish I were not, Betty."

"Do you still hate me, Betty—Miss Malroy—is there anything I can say or do that will make you forgive me?" He looked at her penitently.

But Betty hardened her heart against him and prepared to keep him in place.

"Will you sit down?" she indicated a chair. He seated himself and Betty put a safe distance between them.

"Are you staying in the neighborhood, Mr. Carrington?" she asked, rather unkindly.

"No, I'm not staying in the neighborhood. When I left you, I made up my mind I'd wait at New Madrid until I could come on down here and say I was sorry."

"And it's taken you all this time?" Carrington regarded her seriously.

"I reckon I must have come for more time, Betty—Miss Malroy." In spite of herself, Betty glowed under the caressing humor of his tone.

"Really—you must have chosen poorly then when you selected New Madrid. It couldn't have been a good place for your purpose."

"I think if I could have made up my mind to stay there long enough, it would have answered," said Carrington. "But when a down-river boat tied up there yesterday it was more than I could stand. You see there's danger in a town like New Madrid of getting too sorry. I thought we'd better discuss this point—"

"Mayn't I show you Belle Plain?" asked Betty quickly.

But Carrington shook his head. "I don't care anything about that," he said. "I didn't come here to see Belle Plain."

"Then you expect to remain in the neighborhood?"

"I've given up the river, and I'm going to get hold of some land."

"Land?" said Betty, with a rising infection.

"Yes, land."

"I thought you were a river-man?"

"I'm a river-man no longer. I am going to be a planter now. But I'll tell you why, and all about it some other day." Then he held out his hand. "Good-by," he added.

"Are you going?—good-by, Mr. Carrington," and Betty's fingers tingled with his masterful clasp long after he had gone.

CHAPTER XI.

The Shooting-Match at Boggs'.

The judge's faith in the reasonableness of mankind having received a staggering blow, there began a somewhat furtive existence for himself, for Solomon Mahaffy, and for the boy. They kept to little frequented byways, and usually it was the early hours of the morning, or the cool of late afternoons, when they took the road.

A certain hot afternoon brought them into the shaded main street of a straggling village. Near the door of the principal building, a frame tavern, a man was seated, with his feet on the horse-rack. There was no other

sign of human occupancy.

"How do you do, sir?" said the judge, halting before this solitary individual whom he conjectured to be the landlord. "What's the name of this bustling metropolis?" continued the judge, cocking his head on one side.

As he spoke, Bruce Carrington appeared in the tavern door; pausing there, he glanced curiously at the shabby wayfarers.

"This is Raleigh, in Shelby county, Tennessee," said the landlord.

"Are you the voice from the tomb?" inquired the judge, in a tone of playful sarcasm.

Carrington, amused, sauntered toward him.

"That's one for you, Mr. Pegloe!" he said.

"I am charmed to meet a gentleman whose spirit of appreciation shows his familiarity with a literary allusion," said the judge, bowing.

"We ain't so dead as we look," said Pegloe. "Just you keep on to Boggs' race-track, straight down the road, and you'll find that out—everybody's there to the horse-racing and shooting-match. I reckon you've missed the horse-racing, but you'll be in time for the shooting. Why ain't you there, Mr. Carrington?"

"I'm going now, Mr. Pegloe," answered Carrington, as he followed the judge, who, with Mahaffy and the boy, had moved off.

"Better stop at Boggs'!" Pegloe called after them.

But the judge had already formed his decision. Horse-racing and shooting-matches were suggestive of that progressive spirit, the absence of which he had so much lamented at the jail raising at Pleasantville. Memphis was their objective point, but Boggs' became a side issue of importance. They had gained the edge of the village when Carrington overtook them. He stepped to Hannibal's side.

"Here, let me carry that long rifle, son!" he said. Hannibal looked up into his face, and yielded the piece without a word. Carrington balanced it on his big palm. "I reckon it can shoot—these old guns are hard to beat!" he observed.

"She's the closest shooting rifle I ever sighted," said Hannibal promptly.

Carrington laughed. There was a rusty name-plate on the stock of the old sporting rifle; this caught Carrington's eye.

"What's the name here? Oh, Turberville."

The judge, a step or two in advance, wheeled in his tracks with a startling suddenness.

"What?" he faltered, and his face was ashen.

"Nothing, I was reading the name here; it is yours, sir, I suppose?" said Carrington.

"No, sir—no; my name is Price—Slocum Price! Turberville—Turberville."



Hannibal gave him a frightened glance and edged toward Mr. Mahaffy's side.

"ville—" he muttered thickly, staring stupidly at Carrington.

"It's not a common name; you seem to have heard it before?" said the latter.

A spasm of pain passed over the judge's face.

"I—I've heard it. The name is on the rifle, you say?"

"Here on the stock, yes."

The judge took the gun and examined it in silence.

"Where did you get this rifle, Hannibal?" he at length asked brokenly.

"I fetched it away from the Barony, sir; Mr. Crenshaw said I might have it."

The judge gave a great start, and a hoarse, inarticulate murmur stole from between his twitching lips.

"What do you know of the Barony, Hannibal?"

"I lived at the Barony once, until Uncle Bob took me to Scratch Hill to be with him," said Hannibal.

"You—you lived at the Barony?" repeated the judge, and a dull wonder struck through his tone. "How long ago—when?" he continued.

"I don't know how long it were, but until Uncle Bob carried me away after the old general died."

The judge slipped a hand under the child's chin and tilted his face back so that he might look into it. For a long moment he studied closely those small features, then with a shake of the head he handed the rifle to Carrington, and without a word strode forward. Carrington had been regarding Hannibal with a quickened interest.

"Hello!" he said, as the judge moved off. "You're the boy I saw at Scratch Hill!"

Hannibal gave him a frightened glance, and edged to Mr. Mahaffy's

side, but did not answer.

The judge plodded forward, his shoulders drooped, and his head bowed. For once silence had fixed its seal upon his lips, no inspiring speech fell from them. He had been suddenly swept back into a past he had striven these twenty years and more to forget, and his memories shaped themselves fantastically. Surely if ever a man had quitted the world that knew him, he was that man! He had died and yet he lived—lived horribly, without soul or heart, the empty shell of a man.

A turn in the road brought them within sight of Boggs' race-track, a wide, level meadow. The judge paused irresolutely, and turned his bleared face on his friend.

"We'll stop here, Solomon," he said rather wearily, for the spirit of boast and jest was quite gone out of him. He glanced toward Carrington. "Are you a resident of these parts, sir?" he asked.

"I've been in Raleigh three days altogether," answered Carrington, and they continued on across the meadow in silence.

Here were men from the small clearings in homespun and butternut or fringed hunting-shirts, with their women folk trailing after them. Here, too, in lesser numbers, were the lords of the soil, the men who counted their acres by the thousand and their slaves by the score. There was the flutter of skirts among the moving groups, the nodding of gay parasols that shaded fresh young faces, while occasionally a comfortable family carriage with some planter's wife or daughter rolled silently over the turf.

The judge's dull eye kindled, the haggard lines that streaked his face erased themselves. This was life, opulent and full. These swift-rolling carriages with their handsome women, these well-dressed men on foot, and splendidly mounted, all did their part toward lifting him out of his gloom.

A cry from Hannibal drew his attention. Turning, he was in time to see the boy bound away. An instant later, to his astonishment, he saw a young girl who was seated with two men in an open carriage, spring to the ground, and dropping to her knees put her arms about the tattered little figure.

"Why, Hannibal!" cried Betty Malroy.

"Miss Betty! Miss Betty!" and Hannibal buried his head on her shoulder.

"What is it, Hannibal; what is it, dear?"

"Nothing, only I'm so glad to find you!"

"I am glad to see you, too!" said Betty, as she wiped her tears away.

"When did you get here, dear?"

"We got here just today, Miss Betty," said Hannibal.

Mr. Ware, careless as to dress, scowled down on the child. He had favored Boggs' with his presence, not because he felt the least interest in horse-racing, but because he had no faith in girls, and especially had he profound mistrust of Betty. She was so much easily portable wealth, a pink-faced chit ready to fall into the arms of the first man who proposed to her. But Charley Norton had not seemed disturbed by the planter's forbidding air.

"What ragamuffin's this, Betty?" growled Ware disgustedly.

But Betty did not seem to hear.

"Did you come alone, Hannibal?" she asked.

"No, ma'am; the judge and Mr. Mahaffy, they fetched me."

The judge had drawn nearer as Betty and Hannibal spoke together, but Mahaffy hung back. There were gulfs not to be crossed by him. It was different with the judge; the native magnificence of his mind fitted him for any occasion.

"Allow me the honor to present myself, ma'am—Price is my name—Judge Slocum Price. May I be permitted to assume that this is the Miss Betty of whom my young protegee so often speaks?"

Tom Ware gave him a glance of undisguised astonishment, while Norton regarded him with an expression of stunned and resolute gravity.

Betty looked at the judge rather inquiringly.

"I am glad he has found friends," she said slowly. She wanted to believe that Judge Slocum Price was somehow better than he looked, which should have been easy, since it was incredible that he could have been worse.

"He has indeed found friends," said the judge with mellow unction, and swelling visibly.

Now Betty caught sight of Carrington and bowed. Occupied with Hannibal and the judge, she had been unaware of his presence. Carrington stepped forward.

"Have you met Mr. Norton, and my brother, Mr. Carrington?" she asked.

The two young men shook hands, and Ware improved the opportunity to inspect the new-comer. But as his glance wandered over him, it took in more than Carrington, for it included the fine figure and swarthy face of Captain Murrell, who, with his eyes fixed on Betty, was thrusting his eager way through the crowd.

Murrell had presented himself at Belle Plain the day before. For upward of a year, Ware had enjoyed great peace of mind as a direct result of his absence from west Tennessee, and when he thought of him at all he had invariably put a period to his meditations with, "I hope to hell he catches it wherever he is!"

More than this, Betty had spoken of the captain in no uncertain tones. He was not to repeat that visit.

As Murrell approached, the hot color surged into Betty's face. As for Hannibal, he had gone white to the lips, and his small hand clutched here

desperately.

Murrell, with all his hardihood, realized that a too great confidence had placed him in an awkward position, for Betty turned her back on him and began an animated conversation with Carrington and Charley Norton.

Hicks, the Belle Plain overseer, pushed his way to Murrell's side.

"Here, John Murrell, ain't you going to show us a trick or two?" he inquired.

Murrell turned quickly with a sense of relief.

"If you can spare me your rifle," he said, but his face wore a bleak look.

"Don't you think you've seen about enough, Bet?" demanded Tom. "You don't care for the shooting, do you?"

"That's the very thing I do care for; I think I'd rather see that than the horse-racing," said Betty perversely.

Betty now seated herself in the carriage, with Hannibal beside her, quietly determined to miss nothing. The judge, feeling that he had come into his own, leaned elegantly against the wheel, and explained the merits of each shot as it was made.

"I hope you gentlemen are not going to let me walk off with the prize?" said Murrell, approaching the group about the carriage. "Mr. Norton, I am told you are clever with the rifle."

"I am not shooting today," responded Norton haughtily.

Murrell stalked back to the line.

"At forty paces I'd risk it myself, ma'am," said the judge. "But at a hundred, offhand like this, I should most certainly fail!"

"It would be hard to beat that—" they heard Murrell say.

"At least it would be quite possible to equal it," said Carrington, advancing with Hannibal's rifle in his hands.

It was tossed to his shoulder, and poured out its contents in a bright stream of flame. There was a moment of silence.

"Center shot, ma'am!" cried the judge.

"I'll add twenty dollars to the purse!" Norton addressed himself to Carrington. "And I shall hope, sir, to see it go into your pocket."

"Our sentiments exactly, ma'am, are they not?" said the judge.

"Perhaps you'd like to bet a little of your money?" remarked Murrell.

"I'm ready to do that too, sir," responded Norton quietly.

"Five hundred dollars, then, that this gentleman in whose success you take so great an interest, can neither equal nor better my next shot!" Murrell had produced a roll of bills as he spoke.

Norton colored with embarrassment.



"Yes—a living target!" said Murrell.

ment. Carrington took in the situation.

"Wait a minute," he said, and passed his purse to Norton. "Cover his money, sir," he added briefly.

"Thank you, my horses have run away with most of my cash," explained Norton.

"Your shot!" said Carrington shortly, to the outlaw.

Murrell taking careful aim, fired, clipping the center.

As soon as the result was known, Carrington raised his rifle; his bullet, truer than his opponent's, drove out the center. Murrell turned on him with an oath.

"You shoot well, but a board stuck against a tree is no test for a man's nerve," he said insolently.

Carrington was charging his piece. "I only know of one other kind of target," he observed coolly.

"Yes—a living target!" cried Murrell.

CHAPTER XII.

The Portal of Hope.

"This—" the speaker was Judge Price; "this is the place for me. They are a warm-hearted people, sir; a prosperous people, and a patriotic people with an unstinted love of country. I'd like to hang out my shingle here and practice law."

The judge and Mr. Mahaffy were camped in the woods between Boggs' and Raleigh. Betty had carried Hannibal off to spend the night at Belle Plain.

"I crave opportunity, Solomon—the indorsement of my own claims. I feel that I shall have it here," resumed the judge pensively. "Will you stroll into town with me, Solomon?" he asked.

Mahaffy shook his head. "Then let your prayers follow me, for I'm off!" said the judge.

Ten minutes' walk brought him to the door of the city tavern, where he found Mr. Pegloe directing the activities of a small colored boy who was mopping out his bar. To him the judge made known his needs.

"Goin' to locate, are you?" said Mr. Pegloe.

"My friends urge it, sir, and I have taken the matter under consideration," answered the judge.

"Well, the only empty house in town is right over yonder; it belongs to young Charley Norton out at Thicket Point Plantation."

The house Mr. Pegloe pointed out was a small frame building; it stood directly on the street, with a narrow porch across the front, and a shed addition at the back. The judge's pulse quickened. What a location, and what a fortunate chance that Mr. Norton was the owner of this most desirable tenement! He must see him at once. As he turned away to recross the street and learn from Mr. Pegloe by what road Thicket Point might be reached, Norton himself galloped into the village. Catching sight of the judge, he reined in his horse and swung himself from the saddle.

"I was hoping, sir, I might find you," he said.

"A wish I should have echoed had I been aware of it!" responded the judge. "I was about to do myself the honor to wait upon you at your plantation."

"Then I have saved you a long walk," said Norton. He surveyed the judge rather dubiously, but listened with kindness as he explained the business that would have taken him to Thicket Point.

"The house is quite at your service, sir," he said, at length.

"The rent—" began the judge.

But Mr. Norton, with a delicacy equal to his own, entreated him not to mention the rent. The house had come to him as boot in a trade. It had been occupied by a doctor and a lawyer; these gentlemen had each decamped between two days, heavily in debt at the stores and taverns, especially the taverns. And thus quaintly did Charley Norton acquit himself of the mission he had undertaken at Betty Malroy's request.

That same morning Tom Ware and Captain Murrell were seated in the small detached building at Belle Plain, known as the office, where the former spent most of his time when not in the saddle.

"So your sister doesn't like me, Tom—that's on your mind this morning, is it?" Murrell was saying.

"Make it worth my while and I'll take her off your hands," and Murrell laughed.

Tom favored him with a sullen stare.

There was a brief silence, during which Murrell studied his friend's face. When he spoke, it was to give the conversation a new direction.

"Did she bring the boy here last night? I saw you drive off with him in the carriage."

"Yes, she makes a regular pet of the little ragamuffin."

"Is the boy going to stay at Belle Plain?" inquired Murrell.

"That notion hasn't struck her yet, for I heard her say at breakfast that she'd take him to Raleigh this afternoon."

"That's the boy I traveled all the way to North Carolina to get for Fentress."

"Oh—you don't say?" cried Ware.

"Tom, what do you know about the Quintard lands; what do you know about Quintard himself?" continued Murrell.

"He was a rich planter; lived in North Carolina. My father met him when he was in congress and got him to invest in land here. They had some colonization scheme on foot—this was upward of twenty years ago—but nothing came of it. Quintard lost interest."

"And the land?"

"Oh, he held on to that."

"Quintard has been dead two years, Tom, and